DISPARATE
MINDS
PITCHER

Pitcher

A *Disparate Minds* Short Story

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"I know where I want to be, but I can't possibly be sure we're anywhere near it."
—Fantastic Mr. Fox, Roald Dahl

"Pitcher"
A Subconscious Occurrence, Vines and Roots, Not Knowing, And Something That Is Closer Than Before

They *told* her it wouldn't work, and she went and did it anyway. That's what she's thinking, lying on the side of the road. June knows how she got here. It was by trying to get *out*.

The car had revved to an adrenaline-pumping speed. She was rounding the corner. She was going to make it, she thought. She knew damn well that this would be it. Goodbye to Avenue.

No. It wasn't goodbye to Avenue. It was hello to pavement. Hello to the windshield caving in and glass shards on her face and the car in a ditch. And her, thrown out on the side of the road like a dead mouse, picked at by carrion.

Of course it's still night. What else would it be?

June sighs to herself. She feels like the nights are longer here. Like Antarctica. She feels a pool of something, neither warm nor cold, around her head, and she hopes it isn't blood.

She can't move. She can't speak. She's still *there*, of course. Clearly having some sort of concussion or something. She's on the side of the road, in the middle of the night, a crashed car next to her, and if another car comes barrelling down the road listening to *Radar Love* and pushing the pedal down, well, that'll be it for June Gazpacho. She'll be tomato paste.

(She doesn't *want* to be tomato paste, that would just be the way it was. On account of her being dead.)

The deep blue velvet night is still around her, unchanging. And — such a pity — there are no stars. Just the eternal mush of the wet blanket sky. Around her — well, not around her, but near her — the pavement has started to crumble. It's not been repaired for years, so the edges of the road are a little dejected. The little lights in the distance are the worst part. She can

see the town, just too far — the town at which she's spent the past few weeks.

Or has it been months?

She wonders why she'd never tried to leave before now. She'd never liked the place.

In the gloom, she sees the silhouette stand above her. It holds something thin in its hand; thin, but not long.

"What were you trying to accomplish?" her Mother asks her. "Were you trying to get back to me?"

June tries to say something, and fails. It would have been a lie.

Her mother scoffs, her blond beehive looking stern and shadowy in the night air. June's eyes are still adjusting to the light. There's just so *much* of it. So much blinding, blinding light. Flashes of it, like stark lightning. But she can't tell where it's coming from, and it's still there when she tres to close her eyes. June Gazpacho needs to rest.

"Don't rest," her Mother says. "It's not your turn."

June Gazpacho needs to rest. June Gazpacho needs to rest.

"June Gazpacho," her Mother bemoans. "June *Gazpacho*. You sound like a Mexican immigrant. You shouldn't forget your family, young lady."

June's mouth is filled with something that tastes like iron.

"...Oh, right. I forgot! You already did. You left me, didn'tcha?" Mom is getting testy now. "Left me all alone to live with the freaks in Dreamland. Well, let's look where that's got you."

Alone.

"Yes." Her mother's mouth is a thin line of disapproval.

It's an unusual sight, really. *Usually*, when she was angry, her face would get much more animated, it would bounce up and down like Tony the Tiger. Her eyebrows did ballet. But right now, she's remarkably still, standing in that quintessentially *housewife*-y dress she loves so much. She looks like an advertisement for the fifties, at times. God knows they'd never have tolerated her then.

"I just don't know what you were trying to *do* here. Did you think that you'd made it? Did you think you were joining the X-Men or something? Newsflash, honey. James McAvoy doesn't want shit to do with you."

June took her mother to the theatre to see a movie, once. Once. *One time.* The movie was *X-Men: Apocalypse*. She's never lived it down.

To calm her nerves, her mother takes a drag from a long cigarette, which June knows is filled to the brim with *something*. The light from the blunt illuminates her face, however briefly. She taps her foot.

"You're bleeding out of your mouth, you know."

I know.

"Alright, just making sure." Another hit. She exhales slowly, puffing it out into the cold night air. June can hardly imagine how freezing she must be in that indoor dress. "It's been tough for me, since you left. I hope it's been a little better for you. That hope gets me by, day to day. Nine to Five. That's how you do it."

The pavement feels rough. June has never much liked the texture of pavement. She remembers parties in the summertime, where she would have run barefoot through the sprinkler, picking up muck from the yard. In those days, even when she was chasing her friends, she would always avoid the pavement, the tarmac. It was rough between the toes, it had all those tiny little sharp bits that weren't *that* sharp really, they were worn down, but they were still Hell on her feet. The pavement right now reminds her of that.

"You're getting distracted!" Her mother still stands, implacable. "I've started dating Tommy, by the way. I know you never approved of him. But it's not like I need your approval. You're my daughter, after all. I just need you to not make my mistakes."

June can't see her mom's face, because she's not puffing at the cigarette — at the blunt — at *whatever* it is, the thing with the burning orange thing at the end. But her voice — her mother's voice sounds all torn up.

"I'm sorry that you have, for the record. Suckered in by men."

Women.

"Same difference."

And she's not dating them.

Her mother ignores her. She ignored what June said all the time when she said it out loud, it's probably even easier to ignore June's thoughts.

Is she hallucinating?

It seems likely she's hallucinating. After all, she's in Avenue. Well. A road outside Avenue. And her Mother… her Mother's back home. There's no way her mother's here right now. She's not in Kansas anymore.

Yeah.

She's dying on the side of the road, not from a celluloid demon or ghosts of the damned or AI figures come to feast upon humanity, but from a car crash.

She's seen a few car crashes over the years. The twisted metal, bent into figure-eights and curly Qs. Never been in one, of course. Until now.

'Until now' is definitely the operative part there.

SURREALISM IS DERIVED FROM THE SUBCONSCIOUS MIND.

Yeah, it's very disappointing to be out here. She'd say it feels like a bad nightmare. Although a car crash makes more logistical sense than a lot of things that have happened to her lately — it's always been a very real fear to her. Not like being replaced by a cellophane thingamajig. ~~Funny word, thingamajig.~~ She never anticipated that. But June anticipates car crashes all the time. She remembers putting off her driver's test, year after year, after year. Never felt ready. Oh, sure. She considered herself a responsible adult early on, her mother saw to her fast maturation. But a driver? No. Not June.

Probably why she crashed.

Fuck.

There was a time where she was in a car with Mom, and part of her mind became acutely aware that they were going down the highway at fifty miles per hour and if she leaned on the door too hard or something, she would fall out and she would splatter and be run over by, like, thirty people in a row. No matter where she leaned, or sat, or adjusted herself, she couldn't get away from the irrational idea that she might just fall out *through* the car — through the side, or the bottom of the car maybe, straight through her seat, onto the twisted highway road. She just felt *in danger*. There was no logic behind it, it had made no sense. The fear was overpowering in the most literal sense. She

never felt anything that extreme since, not until Avenue. And her mother looked at her crying there as they went down the highway and groaned, like she had lost a bet.

She's gonna die here. She's gonna actually die here. Not like, as an illusion, a day dream, but in the morning, Anthea and the others, they'll find her slightly mangled body, and Anthea will say what a damn shame it is, and Wick will cry buckets. Poor Wick. He's had it so hard already. But she supposes she's had it hardest. Because — oh God. She's gonna die here. She's gonna fucking die.

Oh, please, God, don't let me die.

"It's good you're still Christian," her Mother says. "I've given up going to Church lately. I know that's a bad thing. But they say you can hold Christ in your heart regardless, and if you can't make it to Sundays every time, well, that's alright, as long as you try to, some of the time. They're much more lenient on these things lately. Less Old Testament, you know? They're even trying to get the gays to go to Church now."

Another long damn hit at the Cigarette. June's surprised her Mom's not ripped out the Bong, but she supposes it's probably not respectable enough to do while staring at a body on the side of the road.

Provided her Mother's not a hallucination. Which still feels likely somehow. Easier to suppose she's going mad than to think her Mother would actually come to see this — much less at this precise time, in this precise location, on some abandoned road on the way out of Avenue.

People have said a lot of things about Abandonment lately. It's one of Anthea's favourite words. Something to do with how Haunts are created. June still can't follow precisely what a Haunt is, or why she should care. There's just not been decent enough clarification, it's just some more surreal babble. June's had enough of surreal babble. Thinking on it, what she wants is just a lick of normalcy. For things to be back to how they were, just a tiny bit. That's probably what she wants. But that's just a dream.

She sits up. It hurts.

"No, no, don't hurt yourself," her mother says. "Lie back down."

The woods, on the rocks. A sign by the side of the road. It's so bleak out here. She half-expects to see a road sign, pointing out: TWO MILES TO DESOLATION.

She's used to seeing nonsense like that. Mysteries that aren't real. Open, unanswered questions. Invitations to confusion. Why should she care about that, again? Does she have a reason to care — a true mystery to solve? Or would that even be enough? She's sort of apathetic to it now. She takes in a deep breath, and it's not as agonising as it's been. It feels better, somehow — she isn't drifting away, going anywhere. But for moments she can forget that she's on the hard pavement at all.

"If you wanted, really wanted, and you got better, I could take you back home," Mom says. "The Cadillac is just around the corner. Near the parking garage. It's one of the good old ones. Did you hear that Cadillac — they're making them all electric now? Can't buy a good old fashioned diesel even if you want to. Not even hybrids. I gotta say, I've never seen an electric car that works 100% of the time. Seen a few hybrids that work well, and it's nice being good to the environment, but I don't get what Cadillac's trying to do, bouncing on the Carbon Emission Board's dick like that."

She grunts.

"I'm sorry. I think you must get that rambling thing you do from me, I just can't shut up these days. Oh, never mind. I'm glad to talk, because it gives me the idea that you're here listening. Not just out somewhere in space. The Doctors say that it's good to talk to patients when they're real out of it. But I wonder if that's really to help you, or if it's just to help me."

Another drag.

"I shouldn't be smoking in here. You won't tell, will you?"

Everything is so blue. It's the sky. June hadn't noticed it before she came to Avenue, but there's this little light of soft blue saturation that's on everything the sky touches. June's so used to grey and white skies, black nights. But this blue… The golden light of the sun… The world looks normal under it. Not shadowy, foreboding. Nothing like stupid Avenue. She hears the cold beep of a hospital room in the back of her head.

Her mother is still standing by her. Looking down. Her eyes are so warm. They aren't the way she usually is. "I'm not sure what else to talk to you about," she says. "You know, I don't know anything about your life lately. But I *have* been thinking of you. I've been trying to get back on my feet. Not quite successful yet. But I'll get there."

Why is everything so much more real? The colours, the shapes, everything? It's *bright*. Bright! That's amazing. Avenue never got much brighter than a

flickering orange streetlamp. Avenue isn't *real*. Nobody lives in desaturated concrete catacombs, nobody would ever tolerate it. Life! Life is real, not Avenue. She'll be looking at beautiful green forests and blue rivers and hot pink sunset skies. She can look at that again. She's been forgiven, after all. This is what she deserves.

It's fine. Avenue was a silly mistake, a bad dream. She'll look back on it and laugh. She can get a nice job at Walmart. Working cashier. And when they ask where she was, she will smile! She'll smile in her bright-blue Walmart uniform and she will say: "Oh, I went a little crazy for a few months, but I'm fine." Wouldn't that be something? To have a proper life like everyone else?

After Avenue, it seems like it's the best option in the world.

'How can a hospital look so *perfectly* wonderful', she thinks, feeling all giddy and beautiful. She's been forgiven. She's been forgiven. She's been forgiven.

Her mother is standing there, smiling so softly, and she's forgiving her, and —-

Why?

Why would she forgive her? She doesn't deserve that. Her mother was unfair at the best of times. Cruel. Frankly, abusive. An addict who cared more about the fix than *her*.

"That's not true," her Mother says, but June still can't believe it somehow.

She's not in a hospital bed. How did she get here? It just doesn't make a bit of *sense*, does it? She was on the pavement…

"I rescued you," her mother says.

June looks at her mother's face. It's so close. She doesn't know how they managed to make something so close. She hates the strange questions, all the wrong questions, but they keep coming up. She needs to ask.

"How?"

"I found you on the pavement," her mother repeats. "Crashed car."

"Outside Avenue," June notes.

"Avenue's a dream," her mother responds. "I found you here."

"Found me where?" June asks.

"Here. Where we come from." Her mother seems to hesitate. "Near our house."

"You don't *know*, do you?"

June laughs.

She's figured it out. *This* is surreal bullshit. Not even *inspired* surreal bullshit. It's Hansel and Gretel, for fuck's sake. Lure the kids to the candy house, so you can fatten them up and eat them.

"No, that's not true —"

"How did you know what I was thinking?" June fires back.

"I *didn't*!" her mother insists.

There's something desperate in her eyes now. June makes hers hard and steely.

"What's my last name?" she asks at last.

The mother paused. She looks at June carefully, and says nothing.

"You mocked me using Gazpacho," June presses on. "Said that's not my last name. Avenue *took* that. So if Avenue's not real, then what's my last name?"

It looks at her with irritation. The look in its eye is *so* exact. It's exactly how her mother looked at her, with such disdain. But if it really was her mother, she'd be loudly correcting her.

"Things I've forgotten," June states, as much for herself as for the entity's edification. "Things that this place made me forget. There are loads of them, you know."

It smirks, as if a look will prove her wrong.

"What school did I go to?" June asks.

It does not reply. Why would it? June decides to push forward.

"Where do I live? Where did I come from?" She's on a roll.

"Town!!" the Mother answers, desperately.

June almost wants to laugh at the word, spoken with such desperate conviction, like a quiz show contestant blurting out the answer in the last five seconds. But her sense of triumph begins to falter as the expression on her Mother's face slowly changes.

And just like that, it changes tactics.

"I can give you what you want, June. I can give you a life that isn't… this. Isn't you… ruining your life, your hopes and dreams in a small town of nothing."

June doesn't think this is rational in the least. "But it wouldn't be real, would it," she says, not even a question, looking straight back at her mother. Like she did at the start.

"Who's to say what's real?" it pleads. The face strikes June as remarkably unnerving… it's still an exact likeness, but she's never seen these expressions upon her mother's face — not until now, not on the real one. "Who's to say any of us are? Isn't it about what we believe?"

June hesitates, but it's only for a moment. "I believe in my friends," she says. It's a simple thing to say, but she had to say something — and it's true. She *does* believe in Wick and Serena, far more than she believes in this thing.

"But you abandoned them — like you abandoned your mother. You left without saying goodbye," the Mother points out. "Will you abandon me too?"

The hospital room is darker and colder than before, and colour is seeping out of it. June can begin to see the entity behind it all. Enormous and flesh-like. Dangling the thing that looks like her mother on a muscly protuberance, something like a puppet string or an umbilical cord. Her mother's face has seams in it. Perhaps it was always sewn, or grown like a great plant. Regardless of the methodology of its appearance, it was clearly trying to frighten her into submission.

"Do you choose a life of abomination?" It asks, her mother's lips not moving. "Do you want *this*…"

And then the world is bright again. Peaceful. Birds chitter and chirp. It's her home, the home without a name. And her mother smiling in a kitchen apron, stands behind the countertop with a fresh batch of pizza.

"*Or this?*"

It's her life, as it was, on one of the good days. Her dog comes bouncing around the corner. June can't help herself.

"Sparkles!" she cheers happily, looking at the ever-friendly terrier.

Her mind is aflutter with all the wonderful things in the world. She's sucked in once more.

Leaning down to pet the dog, she spots the garbage can. Her life, as it is. Her mother's needles overflowing from the bin. She sees empty bottle after bottle of pills. Just as it always was before. *God no.*

No more running.

June looks up at her mother, smiling the Stepford grin. And June makes the choice again.

"Avenue," she says.

And then she's on the street corner.

Her blood has stained the pavement, but she no longer bleeds. It is the grey night that it has always been. The road winds over a few mild hills, leading back to the town. There's a street sign near her, a yellow triangle with a symbol within it that she does not know. In the opposite direction, on the way out of Avenue, the road tapers off to an infinite whiteness that no one else alive has ever seen. To nothing.

"I took care of you," it says. "Do not forget this."

It was a Venus Flytrap. Playing with her memories, trying to draw her in. But June can't help but somehow feel thankful regardless. It *was* a reasonable thing, for all the surrounding madness; reasonable in the most literal sense. It could be reasoned with. That's more than she can say about most of its ilk.

No, it's more than that. She feels somehow that this darkness on the edge of town, this strange thing that hid the light was not a cruel creature in the least.

"I won't," she feels compelled to reply, and she finds that she means it.

"Your choice is made, then," the Mother says. "It was not a wise one. But I shall abide by it."

June stands. There are bandages on her chest. …From the hospital? She puts the thought out of her mind. She looks at the desolate road. It's abandoned.

Didn't Anthea say something about abandonment before?

She looks at the car in the ditch. She wonders where she got it — another thing she's forgotten. But the crash was real. The crash was her fault. She's got to be more careful.

She looks back at the creature, for just a moment. Its face has opened on the seams, revealing a blossom behind her mother's weary skin. Light pink, or lilac. She isn't sure in this light. It's quite beautiful, either way.

But the sight of it makes June feel all the more certain that there has never been anything of that sort underneath the façade of her actual mother. That she made the right decision — that the man on the bench — the one who guided her to Avenue to begin with… was wiser than she had thought.

She can't remember his face either. Ah, well; these things come and go.

It felt right that she could stand, righter than it ever had before, as she walked toward the town. The wound is still fresh, and she still *wants,* in the bottom of her heart, to leave Avenue, but there's no sense in doing that without doing what she's meant to do first.

And as for that, she'll know it when she sees it.

As she begins her long trek back to Avenue, she fails to notice that someone had spray-painted a red triangle upon the pavement. Oh, she shouldn't have. She should have seen it, should have stopped, committed it to memory. June does not know the hatred and malice the symbol represents. The fury, the indignance and the scorn. She does not know what lies beneath the earth.

But no one knows anything that hasn't happened yet.

And for now, on the long walk home, there is peace.